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ABSTRACT

On the premise that a gap has developed between the newsworthiness of the national political party conventions and the television network resources allocated to cover them, the three major networks' coverage of the 1980 Democratic and Republican national conventions was analyzed to document patterns that influence the networks' portrayal of party conventions. Prime time coverage of the second night's proceedings (generally limited to debate on the party platform and party loyalists speaking to the convention) was taped from all three commercial networks. Three main categories of content were coded for analysis: (1) official proceedings, (2) anchor analysis, and (3) correspondent reports and interviews. The results showed that although official proceedings still accounted for nearly half of broadcast coverage, the networks' own interpretations of convention events dominated coverage. All three networks relied heavily on floor correspondent reports, interviews, anchor analysis and commentary to punctuate coverage. Official convention proceedings were dispensed to viewers in 6- to 8-minute segments, with convention organizers usually adapting their agendas to meet network constraints. Within these similar structures, each network emphasized its particular organizational strength, and inter-network competition was evident throughout the convention. Network producers, sensitive to this "newsworthiness gap," may devise a new coverage model for 1984, abandoning continuous coverage of the conventions. (HTH)

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A Content Analysis of Network TV's Coverage of the 1980 Party Conventions

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A Content Analysis of Network TV's Coverage of the 1980 Party Conventions

Since 1952 when the networks began full-scale coverage of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, these quadrennial political meetings have become synonymous with television. Even though Nielsen ratings showed that less than half of those watching television tuned to the 1980 Republican National Convention and slightly more than half watched the Democratic convention, television commitments to coverage actually increased (Viewers, 1980). In 1980, for the first time in twelve years, all three networks devoted almost continuous prime-time coverage to the two conventions using more than 2,000 employees and spending an estimated $40 million, twice the amount spent twenty years earlier (Hickey, 1980A). Against this rising allocation of resources runs a steady decline in the importance of party conventions to the electoral system. With presidential nominees being chosen largely though a series of primaries and pre-convention caucuses held early in the political year, the conventions have almost become anachronisms (Reeves, 1977).

Organizationally, political conventions fit the mold of a commissioned event, whereby television resources are committed long before the convention's news value can be ascertained (Epstein, 1973). Once the conventions are included in the network budgets, they are imbued with a video life and momentum all of their own. By the time the convention draws near, a dazzling electronic support system is already in place and this, to a certain extent, dictates patterns of coverage. While this infrastructure is designed to support the coverage of a newsworthy event, there is some question as to whether the allocation of resources actually influences coverage.

Paletz and Elson (1974) found the networks drifting farther away from coverage of official proceedings and closer to their own interpretations of

convention events. They noted that more innovative, fast-paced coverage required greater emphasis on the functions of anchormen "to link, synthesize, explain, and analyze convention activities and events." Womack and Hoar (1981) found that the attention given leading candidates was, overall, disproportionate to the delegate strength of those candidates when they entered the convention, suggesting that factors other than delegate strength were important determinants of interview attention. Fant (1980) suggested that a reciprocal relationship between the major parties and the television networks has altered the structure and function of the conventions and that inter-network competition is a major factor behind television convention coverage.

This analysis examines network content in an effort to document patterns of coverage that influence the networks' portrayal of party conventions. The premise underlying this study is that a gap has developed between the newsworthiness of the conventions and the network resources allocated to covering them which influences coverage through organizationally-based constraints. Specifically, the study raises the following research questions:

1. Does network-generated convention coverage overshadow coverage of official proceedings?

2. Does the coverage of official proceedings, floor interviews and reports, and anchor booth analysis vary greatly from network to network and convention to convention?

3. What kinds of story lines and coverage rhythms are observable and how do they appear to influence coverage?

THE 1980 CONVENTIONS

When ambitious organizational planning is overlaid upon a lack-luster convention, the news value can be overstated. Such appeared to be the case in 1980 when network executives and correspondents freely admitted the presence of a newsworthiness gap. Among the most outspoken at the Republican Convention was CBS News President William Leonard:

> There's nothing here so newsworthy that it couldn't be televised in a single day--perhaps in a single hour--rather than taking up four nights of prime-time. We've built this elephant gun and we have aimed it squarely at a gnat (Hickey, 1980B).

As opinion grew that the networks had overcovered the 1980 conventions, CBS President Thomas Wyman announced in the Fall of 1981 that his network planned to abandon gavel-to-gavel coverage of the 1984 conventions in favor of summaries and highlights. In explaining his decision Wyman said:

> Unfortunately, over the years the conventions have become far less significant political events and we must ask ourselves whether the public is well served by the availability of long hours when the political process is embarrassed by triviality. The viewers say no. They are watching other programs. We have been responsible for handling an important step in the political process, and we have done it badly when we were on the air with low-content broadcasts. All of us have witnessed the embarrassment of anchormen struggling in a desperate effort to create broadcasts out of non-events (Wyman's, 1981).

Wyman's statement marks one of the rare occasions when network executives have confessed the fallibility of their independent news judgment. Historically, the networks have denied any kind of organizational bias and have contended that they simply hold a mirror to reality and objectively reflect that image to the viewing public (Epstein, 1973). In the case of convention coverage, however, it would seem that time, resource, and organizational norm constraints have had an effect upon the news product and have severely tested the network doctrine of independent news judgment.

While the grumbling about the resources dedicated to convention programming

in 1980 was widespread, some network officials viewed the coverage as a huge public service announcement. NBC News President William Small defended the resources allocated not by traditional news values but as a means of helping citizens prepare for "the most important thing he can do--vote properly. Those who watched the conventions learned a lot about where Democrats stand and where they differ from Republicans" (Playing, 1980). Walter Cronkite of CBS called the conventions an important "civics lesson" while NBC producer Gordon Manning cited the entertainment value, "Americans love a parade, and this is a carnival" (Merry, 1980).

Another factor involved in convention coverage is the role of inter-network competition in what has been called the "Olympics of television journalism" (Brown, 1977). NBC producer Lester Crystal said, "We feel each other's presence. It's one of the few times that we go head-to-head on the same story" (Hickey, 1980A). While the incentive for competition among the networks appears great, the opportunities for clear-cut victories are not. After observing the convention coverage process, journalist Daniel Henninger wrote,

> The three networks don't have too many ways they can compete at these conventions; to the average viewer one network's coverage looks pretty much like another's. What they can do is report breaking news before the competition gets it. This is basically the way newspapers compete with each other, but papers measure their victories with each 24-hour edition. On television, such victories are measured in seconds and minutes, and the TV floor reporters are told instantly if a competing network has pushed a breaking story ahead even an inch. It's then their job to leap-frog the competition and fast (Henninger, 1980).

Convention observers have speculated that the conventions serve as a rite of passage for younger journalists and a reunion for the veterans. Frequently young talent has been tested in the competitive convention atmosphere as a prelude to their advancing to high visibility positions. Chris Wallace, a floor correspondent for NBC, is a good case in point. He is credited with being the first reporter to break the story that George Bush

was Ronald Reagan's vice presidential nominee. Wallace has since moved onto a desk slot with NBC's morning TV show, "Today." Being selected or not selected as a floor reporter or anchor can also be a test of "first-string" status for veteran correspondents. Walter Cronkite's career was thought to be seriously jeopardized when he was replaced as an anchor during one of the 1964 conventions. In 1980, Dan Rather, who had just been designated as Cronkite's successor in the anchor desk on the "CBS Evening News," enjoyed a considerable amount of on-camera attention throughout both conventions. How much of this was due to his competence as a floor reporter and how much was due to his designation as Cronkite's heir is not clear, but he was on camera with interviews or commentary from the floor more than twice as often as any other CBS reporter.

METHOD

One night of prime-time coverage for the Democratic and Republican National Conventions on all three commercial networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) was taped. Each tape contained approximately three and one-half hours of programming except for CBS's second session Democratic coverage which ran three hours. Included in each of the ABC tapes from both conventions was an hour-long special edition of the news magazine "20/20" which usually did not relate directly to the conventions and was not coded. Commercials were not coded.

Second session prime-time proceedings were chosen for analysis because no network predisposition existed for carrying specific major events on this day as it did on the third session with the presidential nominations and the fourth session with the acceptance speeches. The second session convention broadcasts have generally been limited to debate on the party platform and party loyalists speaking to the convention. Given this relatively low content of second session broadcasts historically, it might be assumed that this coverage could be a candidate for omission if the networks pursue the doctrine of limited coverage in 1984.

hree main categories of content, similar to those used by Paletz and Elson, were coded for analysis: (1) official proceedings; (2) anchor analysis; and (3) correspondent reports and interviews. Segments were coded according to the video content. Voice-over commentary by the network anchor was coded as official proceedings when the cameras remained focused on the convention floor. Each category entry contained time identification, network identification, length of segment, and identity of participants. For each interviewee, additional information was recorded regarding political affiliation, convention role, minority status, issue orientation, and story line relevance.

FINDINGS

In their study of NBC's coverage of the 1972 Democratic National Convention, Paletz and Elson reported a shift away from official proceedings to network-originated interviews and analysis which they contended denied viewers a comprehensive, accurate view of the convention proceedings in its entirety. The networks maintained, however, that their mission was to "report" a convention rather than "carry" it and keep the program visually interesting. Table 1, which compares the Paletz and Elson study to the 1980 data, shows that the network's idea of "reporting" a convention is roughly equivalent to carrying official proceedings half of the time and devoting a third of air time to correspondent report with the balance being anchor analysis. Considering the wide differences in news content between the 1972 Democratic and 1980 conventions, the data are strikingly similar, implying the presence of a framework for coverage which remains relatively static despite the dynamism of political news stories.

Table 1 about here

This similarity is further corroborated by tables 2 and 3 which show no major differences among the percentages of time given to any type of coverage. While ABC, with its more limited coverage, devoted less time to convention broadcasts, the percentages of time were equivalent to CBS and NBC which aired continuous convention coverage. Interestingly, out of the nearly 48,000 seconds of coded coverage there was only 84 seconds difference between the amount of time CBS and NBC gave to coverage of official proceedings.

Table 2 about here

Table 3 about here

Official Proceedings

With only half of convention coverage focusing on official proceedings, network producers have become selective in their use of podium-based action. Climactic moments such as presidential nominations, vice-presidential selections, acceptance speeches and floor fights over rules, credentials and platforms have generally dominated coverage. Likewise, convention organizers have become more intent on scheduling events in prime-time that promote party unity and downplay controversy. The parties have also shortened speeches and streamlined procedures in an effort to lure the cameras toward the official proceedings of the

conventions (Fant, 1980).

During second session proceedings, which historically have not been as newsworthy as the third and fourth, both producers and convention organizers have been challenged to make the coverage interesting (Reeves, 1980). At the 1980 Republican Convention, for example, delegates routinely ratified the platform before prime-time coverage began, leaving television viewers with a cavalcade of Republican faithful methodically extolling the virtues of the Party. Only the last minute inclusion to the program of a speech by NAACP leader Benjamin Hooks concerning the status of Blacks in America and in the Republican Party provided a solid news angle aside from speculation over the vice presidential nominee selection.

At the Democratic Convention second session, on the other hand, a lively platform fight over the jobs plank climaxed by Senator Edward Kennedy's speech to the convention, gave the early part of the evening a sense of emotion and drama. With the prospect of a Kennedy groundswell absorbing Carter defections and threatening unity prospects for the Fall, the emotion of the Kennedy supporters provided a good backdrop for coverage of the Kennedy speech and subsequent platform votes.

Despite the apparent difference in newsworthiness between the second sessions of the two conventions, the amount of time the continuous coverage networks (CBS and NBC) spent on official proceedings was very similar (Table 4) and the CBS figures were virtually the same. Coverage of speeches at both conventions fit into the six to eight minute range including beginning and ending applause. Speeches that exceeded that range were likely to be either joined in progress or terminated before their conclusion.

Table 4 about here

By inserting "20/20" broadcasts periodically during the convention, ABC producers retained both maximum flexibility and control over the entire prime-time evening programming. The decision on where to include the hour-long program, however, had to be made far enough in advance to constrain the spontaneity of the broadcast. Because of the "20/20" broadcast at the beginning of the Republican second session, ABC missed all but the last six minutes of Benjamin Hook's unscheduled speech; CBS broadcast the entire thirteen minutes.

While the Hooks speech at the Republican Convention seemed to catch producers by surprise, the network was able to split "20/20" in advance in order to carry the climactic speech by Senator Edward Kennedy during the second session of the Democratic Convention. This maneuver allowed for coverage of the speech, but it caused ABC to miss six of the eleven speakers covered by CBS and NBC as well as the emotional build-up to the Kennedy speech. CBS and NBC viewers received a thirty minute preview of the controversy surrounding the economic jobs plank to the Democratic platform and the role Senator Kennedy played in this fight. They saw Andrew Young pleading for the President's position, interviews with a number of delegates on both sides of the issue, and the intense emotion of the Kennedy delegates contrasted with the less enthusiastic response of the Carter delegates. The spirited introduction of Senator Kennedy and the exuberant demonstration that followed eluded ABC viewers, who went directly from "20/20" to the podium as the Senator began his speech, missing much of the emotion of the occasion.

Overall, ABC viewers were exposed to more than one-third fewer podium speakers during the second sessions and more truncated versions of other speeches. The coverage differences were far more pronounced during the early parts of the broadcasts when the "20/20" interruptions occurred. Toward the end, ABC's

coverage fell in line with its other two competitors. While ABC clearly offered less coverage, it met with increased ratings success during the excursions away from the convention hall. During both of the second session broadcasts, ABC's audience surged when it shifted to "20/20" programming.

Table 5 about here

Table 6 about here

The "20/20" ratings success can be seen more clearly in Tables 5 and 6 which track the flow of audience shares for each of the three networks through the evening of the second session of the Republican and Democratic Conventions respectively. At both conventions, "20/20" was the highest rated program segment. In the case of the Republican Convention, the advantage of screening "20/20" was considerable. Between 8:30 and 9:00 p.m., EDT, ABC led all the networks with a 21 audience share, seven percentage points over CBS and eight percentage points over NBC.

The "20/20" advantage was not as apparent at the Democratic Convention, although the second thirty minutes of the program broadcast between 9:30 and 10:00 p.m., EDT, broke ABC's declining trend for the evening. It is apparent from Table 6 that ABC's first segment of "20/20," while giving the networks a ratings advantage early in the evening, did not position ABC well for the Kennedy speech. With their closer attention to the convention early in the evening, CBS and NBC were able to exploit anticipation of Senator Kennedy's scheduled appearance at 8:30 p.m., EDT, and retain more viewers than ABC. It

appears that while a network can take a short-term gain by inserting entertainment programming into its convention coverage, it runs a greater long-term risk of losing much of that audience when convention coverage resumes.

Since 1972 when Republican convention organizers followed a detailed made-for-television script which even included interruptions for "spontaneous" demonstrations, the networks have become particularly wary of being used by partisan interests (Fant,1980). It has become customary to question the use of material pre-packaged by the Parties and intended solely for self-promotion to the television audience. Still, the networks have continued to broadcast at least parts of films produced by the Parties. At the 1980 Democratic Convention, NBC carried more than ten minutes of a film eulogizing former Vice President Hubert Humphrey while CBS ran only four and one-half minutes. ABC produced its own four minute Hubert Humphrey profile. By dimming the lights in the convention halls for films, convention organizers can make it difficult for the networks to conduct floor interviews. In the case of the Humphrey film, however, ABC filled most of the black-out time with the second half of "20/20" while CBS shifted to its studio for reminiscences of Hubert Humphrey by its three guest commentators. It is interesting that the Humphrey film was the only place in which CBS and NBC differed in their coverage of official proceedings. Both carried exactly the same speakers, and discounting the film, there was only twenty seconds difference in the coverage of official proceedings at the Democratic Convention. NBC and CBS official proceedings coverage of the Republican convention was similar as well with only four minutes separating the two.

Network-generated Coverage

As the news value of the conventions has decreased, the networks have intensified their efforts to fill the void with their own brand of coverage through anchor and correspondent initiatives which now account for nearly half of network convention air time. Aiding the networks in their efforts is a sophisticated communications network which gives television immediate access to almost any convention location:

> The nerve centers...are four control rooms...Central, Remote, Perimeter and Auxiliary...52 television screens lining the walls...minicam crews...all connected to the various control rooms by miles of cable and by microwave relay...intercom systems, radio communications with base stations and walkie-talkies ...About 750 different telephone instruments and close to 500 different centrex lines (Henninger, 1980).

Paletz and Elson (1976) found that more than 83 percent of the delegates interviewed said the convention they attended was more orderly than conventions they had seen on television, concluding that production norms and techniques gave the appearance of conflict and disorder. The networks acknowledge a burden they place on themselves to keep coverage lively and entertaining especially when the news value is lacking. During the 1980 convention, ABC was said to have called up a director from its "Monday Night Football" broadcast to energize the technical coverage (Griffiths, 1980). After the first night of Democratic coverage, Ernest Leiser, CBS's Vice President for Special Events and Political Coverage lamented that, "It will tax our ingenuity to keep the next three nights interesting" (Playing, 1980). As the networks have relied increasingly on anchor analysis, correspondent interviews and reports, pre-packaged taped segments, and guest commentators to round out their convention coverage, each has diligently strived to package a unique blend of these ingredients that will satisfy the viewers' tastes.

Anchor Analysis

Historically, network convention coverage has been structured around an anchorman who serves as a focal point for coverage. Broadcasters like Walter Cronkite and David Brinkley have been relied on for years to provide a high visibility focus to coverage and enhance the credibility of the broadcasts. Some of these veteran anchors have become synonymous with television coverage. Endowed with celebrity status, they can sometimes overshadow events they are employed to cover. This star phenomenon is encouraged by a flurry of personality-based promotional announcements designed to draw viewers to their anchor and correspondent team. These promotional vignettes focus on the network organization rather than the Parties, further blurring the substantive impact of the conventions and the differences between the major political parties.

During the final session of the 1980 Democratic Convention, the celebration of Walter Cronkite's retirement became a media event when NBC focused its cameras on the CBS anchor booth for a tribute, momentarily overshadowing the coverage of the convention. This is not particularly surprising as Cronkite probably had a stronger identity than most of the transitory political figures who paraded before television screens during the week. Even the physical presence of the anchors is impressive during a convention. The four visually-dominating features of the hall are the podium and the three brightly lighted booths where anchors assume a commanding position atop their electronic perches.

Producers are adept at wrapping coverage round anchors in a way that brings out the network's organizational strengths. CBS, for example, placed Walter Cronkite clearly in the spotlight for his final convention appearance in 1980. NBC emphasized the relationship between their two veteran anchors, David Brinkley and John Chancellor, allowing them to lapse frequently into extended, casual colloquies. ABC, meanwhile, with a less experienced anchor team of Frank Reynolds and Ted Koppel, used its anchors sparingly in more abbreviated form to

link disparate elements of coverage together.

These observations about the relative emphasis of the networks on anchormen were supported by the data. Anchor segments on ABC's second session coverage averaged only 35 seconds compared to 49 and 46 seconds respectively on CBS and NBC. The inter-convention anchor segment average was almost identical --44 seconds at the Republican Convention and 43 at the Democratic Convention. Most of the anchor segments were bridges to commercials or other types of coverage, but, on several occasions all three networks used anchor interludes to offer commentary and put events in perspective. NBC, with its seasoned anchor team of Brinkley and Chancellor indulged themselves in lengthy commentaries far more than their competition. At the second sessions of both conventions, ABC and CBS anchors each ventured past the two minute mark only once, but NBC took advantage of the opportunity nine times. Chancellor and Brinkley, for example, used a full three minutes to conjecture on whether Senator Kennedy would have been able to win the convention to his side after his powerful speech had the majority of convention delegates not been bound by Party rules to vote for President Carter.

In addition to their functions as linkers and synthesizers, anchors can often set the tone for convention coverage and the agenda. It is the anchorman who often gauges the pulse of the crowd or the level of acrimony of the debate. At the 1980 conventions, anchors were unusually candid in assessing the newsworthiness of the conventions and the story lines their networks intended to follow. Walter Cronkite, for example, began the second session of the Republican Convention by saying, "The only suspense left in this convention is who Ronald Reagan will pick as a running mate." Accordingly, CBS devoted more than twice as much air time to this subject during the first hour than the other two networks.

At the Democratic second session, Frank Reynolds of ABC began his broadcast by saying, "If you think all the excitement went out of this convention last night with the adoption of the binding delegate rule, you were probably right." Viewers appeared to agree with this assessment as ABC ratings began a steady decline throughout the evening. Reynolds, however, seemed to try to resurrect interest in the convention throughout the rest of the evening: "A quick swing around the floor shows that all is not peace and harmony"; "There is still a great deal of dissension"; "There is still no peace"; "This looks like a bossed convention." In concert with Frank Reynolds' "disunity" theme, ABC correspondents busily hustled eight Carter defectors on the jobs plan rule to the microphones, reinforcing the idea of a bitter split in the party. Meanwhile, NBC conducted two interviews with Carter defectors and CBS none. The ABC disunity theme was further advanced by the fact that five of the eight Carter defector interviews were broadcast within a ten minute period.

Correspondent Interviews and Reports

Since 1952 when portable cameras were introduced to political conventions, network correspondents have possessed the mobility to monitor reaction to podium events instantly, making the coverage of conventions two-dimensional. The networks' technological ability to cover convention events has almost outpaced their ability to assimilate information. During the 1980 conventions, network officials were quoted often concerning the lack of time available to apply rigorous journalistic editing to the numerous reports coming into the control rooms. NBC Producer Lester Crystal acknowledged that it was easy to "get swept up into something in the heat of the moment. We don't have time to go over the interviews with a blue pencil" (Merry, 1980). Indeed, network convention coverage has become like a printing press running live with little editorial restraint.

Patterson (1980) argues that campaign reporting on television is limited

by an obsession journalists have with the "horse race" aspects of the campaign, such that the competitive and strategic positions of the candidates are highlighted rather than more substantive policy stands and issues. The electoral process, Patterson says, is seen on television in win-loss terms.

The storylines throughout the 1980 conventions seemed to follow Patterson's horse race prescription. At the Republican Convention the general storyline remained constant. What changed were the names of the candidates on whom speculation focused, becoming almost a candidate-a-day scenario. At the Democratic Convention four stories were pursued, roughly one for each day:

1) Can Senator Kennedy win the vote on Rules Minority Report Number 5, eliminating the rule binding delegates, and boosting his chances of winning the nomination?
2) Can Senator Kennedy and his supporters humiliate President Carter by winning the vote to include a stronger jobs plank in the party platform?
3) Will Senator Kennedy join President Carter on the platform after President Carter's acceptance speech?
4) Will President Carter be able to unite the Party after the bloody battles with Senator Kennedy?

While win-loss and other metaphors of confrontation seemed to be the guiding light of the network storytellers, few ways could be found for the networks to win clear-cut competitive victories. At best, one network could usually get a small jump on a story that everyone would know anyway within an hour. With so many correspondents chasing so few stories it is easy to see how technology and competitive drive can inject the networks directly into the convention process itself, raising serious questions as to who is in control. The third session of the Republican Convention provided a good case

study in competitive pressures among the networks. The machinations connected with conjectures over who Ronald Reagan would choose as his vice presidential running mate became so chaotic that NBC anchorman John Chancellor called it "politics out of control in the electronic age." Chancellor said that rumors were flying "with the speed of light" and that "in general, everyone got a little off the mark. It was not the finest hour for journalism" (Schardt, 1980).

The drama began early Wednesday evening when CBS's Dan Rather suggested that Gerald Ford would be Ronald Reagan's choice as the vice presidential nominee, a notion advanced even further by Ford himself in an ABC interview. After a considerable building of drama and speculation, CBS's Walter Cronkite announced at 10:10 p.m.:

> CBS has learned that there is a definite plan for Ronald Reagan and the former President of the United States, Gerald Ford, who will be selected as his running mate, an unparalleled, unprecedented situation in American politics...to appear together in this platform for Ronald Reagan to announce that Ford will run with him (Schardt, 1980).

It was nearly two hours later that NBC correspondent Chris Wallace learned from a man running down one of the convention aisles that the vice presidential nominee was indeed Bush. CBS followed with the news less than a minute later; ABC followed five minutes later. After the emotion of the evening had quieted, Newsweek, in a critical analysis of network coverage, asked, "Had the reporters run ahead of the story, forgetting professional caution? Were the politicians using the journalists as pawns in their own devious maneuvers? Had the outcome of the convention been changed by the way it was reported?" (Schardt, 1980).

While these questions are indeed relevant, they seem to reflect the symptoms of television news' aggressiveness more than the root cause. Per-

haps a review of the reaction of the networks to these events will give insight to some of the competitive pressures that were inherent in network convention coverage. After NBC's triumph, Chris Wallace was singled out for high praise as a result of his minute lead over the competition. One publication named him the "hero" of the Detroit coverage, and Wallace called the experience "one of the most remarkable moments of my life" (Smith, 1980). NBC purchased full-page ads in five newspapers proclaiming that "while some reporters were jumping to conclusions, NBC hung in there with extraordinary calm" (Beating, 1980). In an even more revealing show of competitive one-upmanship, CBS ran full-page advertisements in the New York Times and the Washington Post claiming that CBS was "on top of the story...just where you'd expect us to be" (Beating, 1980). In post-convention interviews, CBS's Dan Rather, who promoted the Ford story much of the evening, was strongly defensive of CBS. Rather insisted that CBS "had more of the story and had more of it right than anyone else" and that NBC "didn't have a clue" as to what was happening earlier in the evening (Beating, 1980). Asked if he wished he had been more wary of the story, Rather said, "There have been times in the past when I've felt that way--but not this time. If I hadn't had this story and my competition had had it, I would have wept" (Anderson, 1980).

This episode at the Republican National Convention seems to support the notion that competitive pressure is an important organizational factor in convention coverage aside from the news value of the story. When three separate armies of men and machines go against each other in structured combat, competitive edge is rewarded and every lapse in vigilance is punished. In some cases, the intramural competitiveness can become a primary motivation rather than an unavoidable by-product. Carried to its extreme, these competitive cravings would turn the conventions into no more than video arenas for combat

between network gladiators.

Many times it appears that the networks encourage distortion by their use of quick-paced production techniques and wide-ranging coverage. Paletz and Elson found that more than eighty-three percent of the delegates interviewed said the convention they attended was more orderly than conventions they had seen on television, concluding that production norms and techniques gave the appearance of conflict and disorder. While all three networks used a blend of anchor analysis, correspondent reports, interviews, and profiles to report coverage of the 1980 Conventions, NBC used a special technique by clustering several correspondent reports from different floor locations without an intervening anchor segue. After NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks' speech to the Republican Convention, for example, viewers saw a rapid fire succession of a black Iowa delegate, a black Connecticut delegate, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and a white Mississippi delegate commenting on Hook's speech. NBC used this type of interview clustering twelve times during the second session coverage, six times at each convention.

The NBC technique seemed to have its greatest utility during the second session of the Democratic Convention after Senator Kennedy's emotional speech. NBC presented two four-report clusters immediately following the speech to gauge reaction and show what looked to be the beginning of a Kennedy surge. Reports in the first cluster averaged only 42 seconds, including a 22 second interview with Detroit Mayor Coleman Young. Interviews in the second cluster averaged 74 seconds. Many times when the interview cluster technique was used, correspondents seemed pressured to terminate the interview and hand coverage to another correspondent even when there did not appear to be a compelling reason for doing so.

The NBC penchant for round-robin correspondent reports appeared with such regularity at both conventions that it must be considered an organiza-

tionally-based phenomenon. Womack and Hoar found in their study of the 1972 Democratic Convention that NBC broadcast 78 percent of all interviews. At the 1980 second sessions, NBC interviewed as many participants as the other two networks combined. Thus, it would appear that NBC has established a pattern of relying heavily on floor reporter interviews to amplify its convention coverage and has chosen to enhance the visual effect of those interviews and the pacing of coverage by clustering them together.

Table 7 About Here

Table 7 shows network interviews at both conventions to have run at a lively pace. ABC and NBC interviews averaged less than one and one-half minutes while CBS's carried slightly past the two minute mark overall. Even though conventions represent one of the few times when networks have control of an entire evening of prime time, their time restrictions for interviews appeared to be even stricter than for the thirty minute evening news (Gans, 1979). An exception to this pattern occurred when the interview was conducted in the anchor booth high above the hubbub of the convention floor. In this environment, the pace was more leisurely.

During the second session of the Democratic Convention, for example, only four persons, including two members of President Carter's family, were accorded this privilege: CBS--Lillian Carter (4:01); Ruth Carter Stapleton (3:55); NBC--Lillian Carter (4:50); ABC--Carl Wagner, Kennedy Floor Director (3:30). These interviews averaged 4:05 compared with 1:35 for all convention interviews. Thus, it would appear that an invitation to the network anchor booth would guarantee interviewees far greater exposure than one for a convention floor interview.

Table 7 shows that CBS and NBC were again closely allied in their inter-convention comparisons as was the case with official proceeding and anchor data. Both networks exhibited greater correspondent interview and report activity during the Democratic Convention. ABC, on the other hand, continued

to show an opposite trend. It is assumed that this difference is due to the inclusion of "20/20" programming which disrupted the ABC flow of coverage in various parts of each convention, causing an aberration in the amount of official proceedings coverage in one case and correspondent report coverage in another.

Readily apparent in 1980 was the extensive use of pre-taped reports and guest commentators. Network producers point to these video aids as a means of increased flexibility, especially when the newsworthiness of the convention is suspect. ABC prepared one hundred pre-recorded segments for the Republican Convention and used about twenty (Schardt, 1980). Many of these inserts on ABC were personality profiles to introduce convention speakers to the audience in lieu of the Party's introduction. NBC used taped issue interviews with Ronald Reagan as a counterpoint for floor interviews. CBS sent Charles Osgood to the film library for flashbacks of previous conventions and Andy Rooney to his typewriter for humorous convention observations. The networks used these pre-recorded vignettes twice as much during the second session of the Republic Convention as they did during the Democratic Convention. Presumably, the more volatile, spontaneous atmosphere at the Democratic Convention lessened the need for this type of artificial coverage.

In addition to network-generated tapes, outside commentators were used by all three networks. Most commentators were well-known newspaper columnists but NBC selected prominent members of the opposite party for rebuttals. Carter campaign official Robert Strauss and Democratic Senators Paul Tsongas and Lawton Chiles manned the microphones for the Republican Convention while Republican National Chairman William Brock and Republican Senator William Roth did so for the Democratic Convention.

These commentaries averaged 2:59 at the Republican Convention and 2:58 at the Democratic Convention, although more were broadcast at the Republican

second session. Altogether, twenty-six of the non-floor-related segments were used during the second sessions, averaging 1:40 each. These segments ran considerably longer than the interviews originating from the convention floor and tended to be used during periods when the newsworthiness of the convention proceedings appeared to be low. Thus, the networks were prepared to fill substantial amounts of air time with programming not directly related to the conventions which moved them closer to their own interpretation of convention events and farther away from the reality of the conventions.

Summary

Nineteen-eighty was a watershed year for broadcast coverage of political conventions. Network news executives publicly questioned the model used for the past three decades and admitted the presence of a newsworthiness gap between the resources allocated to the convention and the coverage they deserved. Not only did this newsworthiness gap result in uninteresting coverage but it tempted the networks to liven coverage by artificial means and, in some cases, to become actively involved in the convention process itself.

Although official proceedings still account for nearly half of broadcast coverage, the networks' own interpretation of convention events dominates coverage. All three networks rely heavily on floor correspondent reports, interviews, anchor analysis and commentary to punctuate coverage. Official convention proceedings are dispensed to viewers in six to eight minute segments with convention organizers usually adapting their agendas to meet network constraints.

The newsworthiness of conventions vary greatly, but patterns of coverage do not. In both a 1972 study and the current one, the percentages of time devoted to official proceedings and network-generated coverage remained constant. Furthermore, the 1980 data showed little differences in coverage patterns

between the continuous coverage networks (CBS, NBC) or between conventions, implying a clearly defined ritual for convention coverage. Only when ABC opted out of coverage for an hour each evening were the coverage patterns different.

Within these similar structures, each network emphasized its organizational strength. Anchor reliance, for example, was prominent at NBC and CBS; ABC initiated more pre-recorded segments; and NBC dominated in terms of the quantity and intensity of its floor correspondent reports. All three networks used sophisticated production techniques, pre-recorded material and a wide-ranging array of interviews to quicken the pace of convention coverage and keep it interesting. Even though producers controlled an entire evening of prime time programming, coverage was characterized by short interviews averaging slightly more than one and one-half minutes, resembling the abbreviated format of the thirty minute network evening news. Coverage often followed clear-cut themes, usually couched in win-loss terms which influenced the coverage agenda. Inter-network competition was evident throughout the convention especially during the Republican Convention when broadcast speculation about the vice pesidential nominee became so intense that it raised serious questions as to whether competitive pressures had caused the networks to run ahead of the story and perhaps even influence the outcome of the vice presidential nominee selection.

The experience of the 1980 conventions suggests that network producers, sensitive to the newsworthiness gap, will devise a new coverage model for 1984 which abandons continuous coverage and provides greater flexibility. Still, the tradition of convention coverage as a high prestige broadcast filled with inherent competitive pressures will make change difficult to effect. The assumption that future convention coverage will be downgraded is based upon the current structure of the convention process. Change within the Democratic

Party machinery, however, is underway which could make that Party's convention more dynamic and newsworthy. The Democratic Party's Hunt Commission on Presidential Nominations has recommended eliminating the rule requiring delegates to vote for the candidate to whom they were originally pledged and creating 550 additional uncommitted voting delegates chosen from elected and party officials.

While these changes would not radically alter the structure of the Democratic Convention, they would inject more uncertainty into the process and increase the importance of the conventions as forums in which delegates can be persuaded to a particular point of view. It would be interesting to see if structural changes within one convention perceived as increasing newsworthiness would influence the allocation of time and resources to that convention. If not, the two convention broadcasts would seem to be so inexorably linked organizationally that newsworthiness would cease to be a factor in coverage allocation decisions, disputing the longheld network doctrine of independent news judgment.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF 1972 NBC DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION COVERAGE WITH 1980 DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN SECOND SESSION COVERAGE ON ABC, CBS AND NBC

	1972	1980
Official Proceedings	47%	52%
Correspondent Reports/Interviews	34%	32%
Anchor Analysis	19%	16%
	100%	100%

COMPARISON OF 1972 AND 1980 NBC SECOND SESSION DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

	1972	1980
Official Proceedings	44%	52%
Correspondent Reports/Interviews	34%	27%
Anchor Analysis	22%	21%
	100%	100%

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF 1980 SECOND SESSION CONVENTION COVERAGE BY PARTY

	Republican		Democrat		Total	
Official Proceedings	12706[1]	50%	11931	53%	24637	52%
Correspondent Reports/Interviews	8210	33%	7225	32%	15435	32%
Anchor Analysis	4400	17%	3246	15%	7646	16%
TOTAL	25316	100%	22402	100%	47718	100%

[1] Time given in seconds.

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF 1980 SECOND SESSION CONVENTION COVERAGE BY NETWORK

	ABC		CBS		NBC		Total	
Official Proceedings	5981[1]	49%	9286	55%	9370	50%	24637	52%
Correspondent Reports/Interviews	4159	34%	5186	30%	6090	33%	15435	32%
Anchor Analysis	2014	17%	2525	15%	3107	17%	7646	16%
TOTAL	12154	100%	16997	100%	18567	100%	47718	100%

[1] Time given in seconds.

TABLE 4

COMPARISON OF 1980 SECOND SESSION
OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS COVERAGE BY PARTY

	Republican		Democrat		Total	
ABC	3636/7[1] (8 min. 30 sec.)	61%	2345/5 (7 min. 45 sec.)	39%	5981/12 (8 min. 20 sec.)	100%
CBS	4663/11 (7 min.)	50%	4623/12 (6 min. 25 sec.)	50%	9286/23 (6 min. 45 sec.)	100%
NBC	4407/9 (8 min. 5 sec.)	47%	4963/11 (7 min. 30 sec.)	53%	9370/20 (7 min. 50 sec.)	100%
Total	12,706/27 (7 min. 50 sec.)	52%	11,931/28 (7 min. 5 sec.)	48%	24,637/55 (7 min. 30 sec.)	100%

[1] Total length of segments in seconds/Number of segments
(Average length of segments)

TABLE 5

Republican Convention

Audience Share by Network

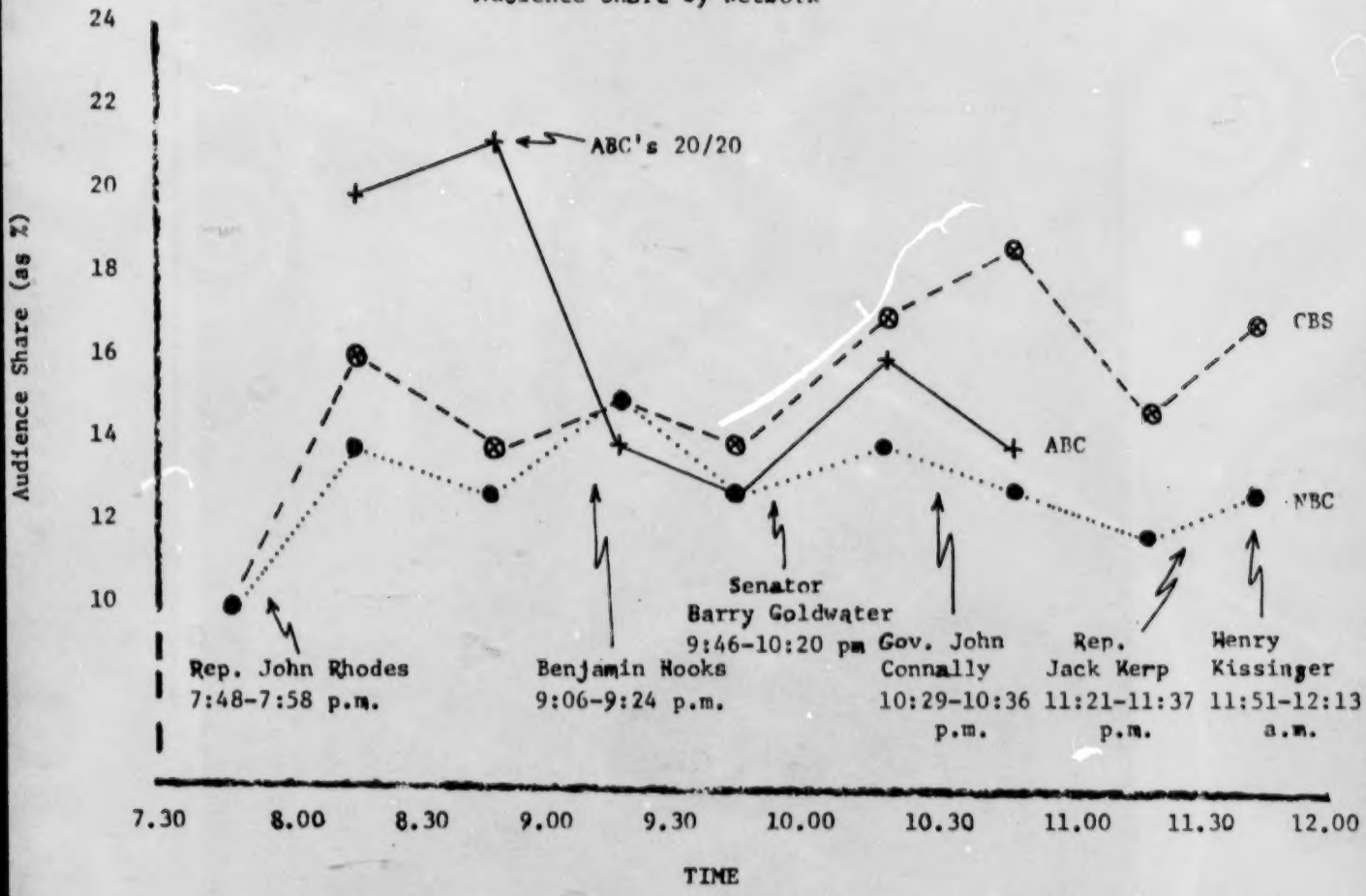

TABLE 6

Democratic Convention

Audience Share by Network

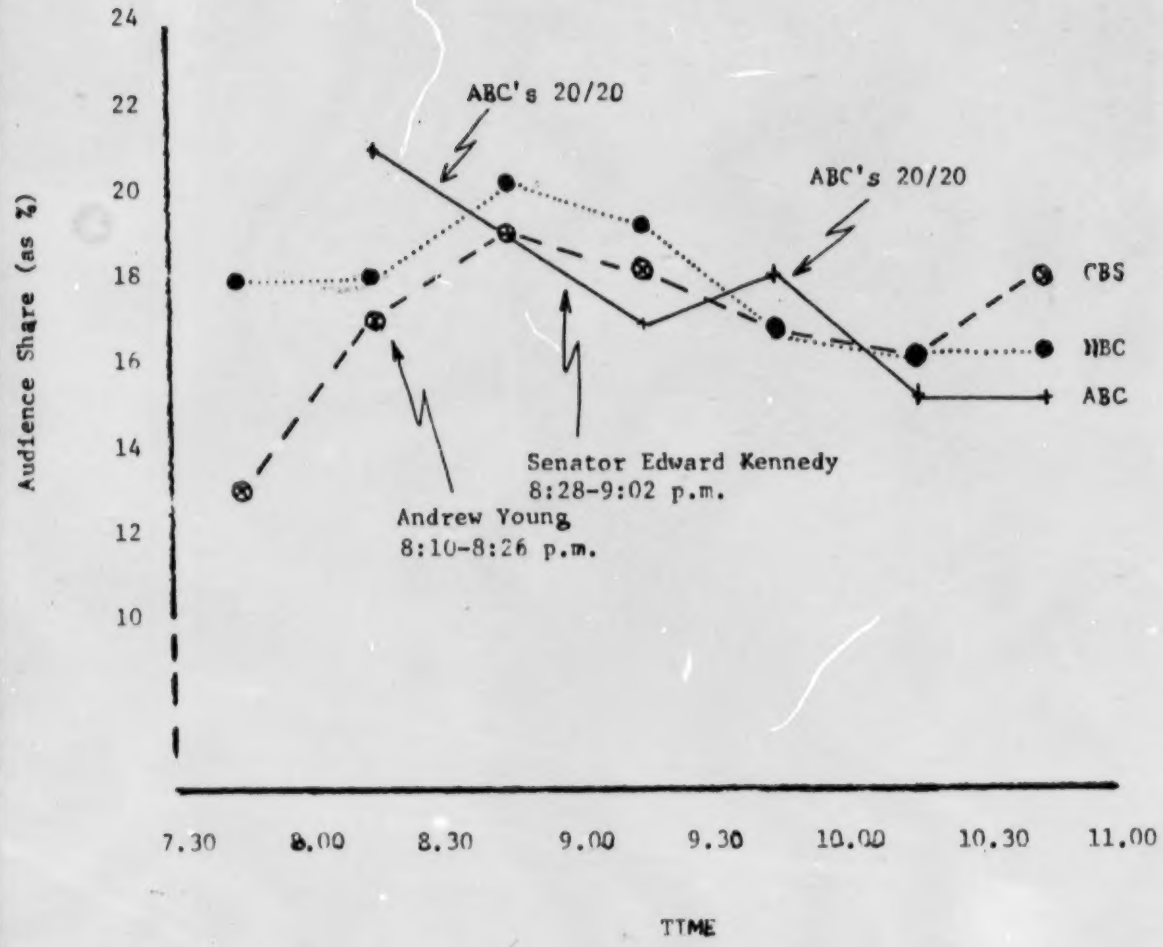

TABLE 7

COMPARISON OF 1980 SECOND SESSION
CORRESPONDENT REPORTS/INTERVIEWS BY PARTY

	Republican		Democrat		Total	
ABC	1685/17[1] (99 seconds)	41%	2474/34 (72 seconds)	59%	4159/51 (82 seconds)	100%
CBS	2927/26 (112 seconds)	56%	2259/16 (141 seconds)	44%	5186/42 (123 seconds)	100%
NBC	3598/40 (89 seconds)	59%	2492/29 (85 seconds)	41%	6090/69 (88 seconds)	100%
Total	8210/83 (99 seconds)	53%	7225/79 (91 seconds)	47%	15437/162 (95 seconds)	100%

[1] Total length of segments in seconds/Number of segments (Average length of segments)

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